PROFESSIONAL CORRECTNESS

STANLEY FISH

LITERARY STUDIES AND POLITICAL CHANGE

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This book is dedicated to L. Glenn Black, Christopher and Gillian Butler, Andrew Lockett, Helen Nicolaou, Joseph Raz, Vicki Reeve, Kim Scott Walwyn, and the many others who showed such kindness to two strangers in Oxford.

Preface

THIS book is a revised and expanded version of The Clarendon Lectures delivered at Oxford in the middle two weeks of May, 1993. I can say without reservation and with a great deal of nostalgia that this brief period was a highlight of my life in the academy, now approaching its thirty-fifth year. In revising, I have chosen to accentuate rather than remove traces of the lecture mode, and I have incorporated, wherever possible, the responses of those who heard the lectures and spoke or wrote to me in the intervals between them.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to friends and colleagues who read the manuscript and made many valuable suggestions. They are Homi Bhabha, Jonathan Crewe, Peter Goodrich, Howard Horwitz, William Kerrigan, Walter Benn Michaels, Richard Ohmann, Thomas Pfau, Stanley Stewart, and Hap Veeser.

In this list one name stands out for me. Howard Horwitz twice gifted me with marathon telephone conversations totalling perhaps thirty hours. In these conversations, Howard let no sentence stand until he had imagined and warned against the misapprehensions it might provoke unrevised. I don't know whether this is friendship, but it will do.

It has been pointed out by Homi Bhabha, Peter Goodrich, and Hap Veeser (personal communication), that my own performance in these lectures might be seen to contradict their thesis, since I, myself, 'stand astride disciplines and speak to a public sphere' (Goodrich).

To this I would say, one does not range across disciplines for no reason, and the reasons that lead one to range will always be task specific; therefore, the materials one quarries while ranging will

be seen and configured through the lens of that task. This kind of ranging, in short, does not mark a departure from a disciplinary focus, but a sharpening of it. This is quite a different thing from the interdisciplinarity against which I argue in this book; the difference lies in the claims of that more ambitious project—to blur the boundaries between academic subjects or between the academy and the world, to enlarge the mind, to loosen the constraints imposed by 'parochial' disciplines. It is these claims that I reject, but my rejection of them does not deprive me of the resources of other disciplines when I sit down to do a particular job of work. In this book, that job (as I assign it to myself) is a consideration of the relationship between academic labours and political change. In the course of undertaking that consideration, I look at this discipline and at that one, sometimes contrasting them, sometimes aligning them, but always viewing them from the perspective of the questions with which I begin. Thus I do not *do* history or legal theory or philosophy in these pages; rather, I make reference to the internal workings of these disciplines when I think that such a reference will help me to clarify a distinction or respond to an anticipated objection. The one moment when the task-specific focus of my performance is relaxed occurs in Lecture V when my analysis of a line from *Paradise Lost* ceases being an example of something and is pursued for its own sake. At that moment I am not enriching my central thesis, or deepening it; I am abandoning it, doing literary criticism rather than talking about doing literary criticism.

Another early reader of these pages wondered about the relationship between my strong defence of disciplinary integrity and the thesis of social constructionism which seems such a threat to integrity of any kind. In fact, the thesis of social constructionism is a threat to nothing; or, rather, it is a threat only if it is asserted weakly. That is, the thesis of social constructionism can do genuine work only if it is limited, a thesis about some things but not about everything; only if it is a thesis about some things, does it enable a distinction between that which is socially constructed

and that which is not. Armed with that distinction, one could then say about some discipline that it was more or less firmly grounded than some other. But if *everything* is socially constructed, the fact of a particular thing being socially constructed is not a fact you can do anything with. It won't help you to distinguish that socially constructed thing from all the other socially constructed things.

This does not mean that there are no differences to be noted between objects, activities, and structures, only that the differences cannot be marked by the presence, absence, or degree of social constructedness. Since, for example, history and literary studies are both social constructions, the fact of social constructedness (which they share) will not be a way of distinguishing between them, and in search of the appropriate distinctions you will be turned back to the 'immanent intelligibility' each displays in its equally (but differently) socially constructed form; that is, you will be turned back to the everyday routines, disciplinary features, canonical problems, and established authorities that were obvious and perspicuous for you before you went down the (dead-end) road of social constructionism. Although it may seem paradoxical at first, the conclusion is unavoidable: the larger the asserted scope of social constructedness, the less it matters.

There are in general two wrong uses to which the thesis of social constructedness has been put. Sometimes it is used as a critique: 'aha, your agenda or project is socially constructed!'. But it can hardly be a criticism of something that it is socially constructed if everything is. At other times, it is said that once you see that something is socially constructed you are better able to revise it. But the impulse to revise has been experienced and acted upon long before social constructionism was ever thought up; and, moreover, those who have been persuaded to the social constructedness thesis are in no better position to revise than anyone else since the work of revision isn't furthered a whit by declaring it to be possible. The real work remains and will occur within the parameters, and in relation to the in-place machinery,

of particular disciplines; the real work cannot be done or even begun by simply *announcing* the thesis of social constructedness.

My position on social constructionism is what distinguishes me from both sides of the debate about disciplines and disciplinary integrity. Most people who defend disciplines and their boundaries believe that in order to do so they must attack post-structuralist and post-modernist thought, and attack especially the notion that disciplines, like everything else, are socially constructed. Most post-modernists and post-structuralists, on the other hand, assume that the epistemology to which they have been persuaded and especially the anti-essentialism of that epistemology, commits them to denying the reality and efficacy of disciplinary boundaries. I assert, and assert without contradiction, that post-modernist accounts of how disciplines come into being are correct, but that such accounts, rather than telling us that disciplines are unreal tell us just how disciplines came to be as real and as productive as they are.

I would like to provide this book with two directions for the user. 1. Do not read it as evidence that I have changed my mind or my politics. 2. Do not read it as a repudiation of cultural studies, black studies, feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, and other forms of activity that have reinvigorated the literary scene. The argument that unfolds here is absolutely continuous with arguments I have made since the late 1970s, and my support for non-traditional scholarship in the humanities is as strong as it ever was and extends to the work of many I criticize in these pages. What I question is not their accomplishments, which are many, but the claims that sometimes accompany those accomplishments, claims which are in my view uncashable. Nothing I say here should be construed as support for the neo-conservative assault on the humanities, an assault made up of equal parts of ignorance and malice. Of course I cannot prevent misreadings or the misappropriations they might enable, but I can certainly label them as such in advance.

My argument first began to take form in 1990 when I was

invited to give a seminar at the Folger Library. My Folger notes were then expanded into a pilot manuscript in the spring of 1992 when I was privileged to be a Fellow of the National Humanities Center in Research Park, North Carolina. Final revisions were completed in the course of my residence at the Center for Ideas and Society at the University of California at Riverside in the winter and spring of 1995. Along the way I was the beneficiary of the efforts and dedication of a marvelous staff, including Miriam Angress, Katie Courtland, Lisa Haarlander, Jan Martuscelli, Susan Ryman, and Anne Wills.

Contents

LECTURE I

Yet Once More

TO the ears of many in this audience, the lectures I am about to give will sound retrograde and reactionary because they go against the grain of much that has been said in recent years about literary and cultural studies. Specifically, I shall be questioning the possibility of transforming literary study so that it is more immediately engaged with the political issues that are today so urgent: issues of oppression, racism, terrorism, violence against women and homosexuals, cultural imperialism, and so on. It is not so much that literary critics have nothing to say about these issues, but that so long as they say it *as* literary critics no one but a few of their friends will be listening, and, conversely, if they say it in ways unrelated to the practices of literary criticism, and thereby manage to give it a political effectiveness, they will no longer be literary critics, although they will still be something and we may regard the something they will then be as more valuable.

The literary critic as I imagine him is anything but an organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense; instead he is a specialist, defined and limited by the traditions of his craft, and it is a condition of his labours, at least as they are exerted in the United States, that he remain distanced from any effort to work changes in the structure of society. It is not that society's structure is unalterable or that there could never come a day when the words of a literary critic will resound in the halls of congress; it is just that I do not see that day coming soon and I do not think that any-

thing you or I could do will bring it closer. Samuel Goldwyn once said in response to someone who asked him why his movies were not more concerned with important social issues, 'If I wanted to send a message, I'd use Western Union.' I say, if you want to send a message that will be heard beyond the academy, get out of it. Or, if I may adapt a patriotic slogan, 'the academy—love it or leave it'.

I am aware of course that simply to utter such pronouncements is to invite a barrage of objections—who are you to say? isn't this a return to the discredited notion of the mandarin intellectual? aren't you presenting one more brief for the status quo?—and in the course of writing and revising these lectures I have tried to anticipate those objections and to reply to them. I have used as a heuristic device someone I thought of as The Cultural Critic, and at every point I have asked myself, 'What would The Cultural Critic say? Providence always provides, and in this case Providence provided a book by Alan Sinfield entitled *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1992). In that book Sinfield has some harsh things to say about me, although not so harsh as the things said recently by Christopher Norris, who at times seems to hold me (along with Richard Rorty, Baudrillard, and Lyotard) responsible for the Gulf War. Sinfield says that I 'totalize'—a major crime in his lexicon, perhaps equivalent to serial murder; that I employ a 'bullying tone'—well, he has a point there; that I desire to entrap 'understanding within a closed system'; and that I am 'complacent' in contrast to the new historicists who have the good grace to be '*anxious about* entrapment' (288–90). I would say instead that anxiety about entrapment is the new historicist's version of complacency; anxiety, of a particularly self-righteous kind, is what they do for a living. At any rate the difference between me and Sinfield is helpfully stark and it can be measured by one of his pronouncements: 'Literary criticism tells its own stories. It is, in effect, a subculture, asserting its own distinctive criteria of plausibility' (51). I couldn't agree more; in fact the word

'distinctive' will play a large part in my argument and the ways of plausibility—or, as I put it, of 'immanent intelligibility'—are my subject. Sinfield, however, regards the plausibility of literary criticism as a sham and a lure; 'coherence', he announces, 'is a chimera'; it obscures the multiform nature of what it tries to domesticate and it is often in complicity with the most 'regressive aspects of our cultural formation' (51). My view of coherence, plausibility, and distinctiveness is more benign; together they underwrite the culture in which I am privileged to work (and indeed any culture in which anyone could work), and in what follows I trace out the lineaments of that culture without apologizing for it.

I shall begin by offering an example of the kind of story the literary culture characteristically tells, and I have chosen as my vehicle the first three words of Milton's *Lycidas*. What follows is an analysis that would seem familiar and even ordinary to literary actors in general and Miltonists in particular. The analysis is thus a sample piece of work rather than the work I would do if I were writing an essay for submission to *Milton Studies*. In that essay, which I will now *not* write, I would focus on the image of a body weltering to the parching wind, and thereby becoming parchment, and I would observe that such a body/surface is available for inscription by forces indifferent to its previous history. I would then link this observation to the tropes of writing on water, walking on water, and drowning in water, all of which, I would say, are refractions of Milton's fear of strong women who will either overwhelm you, abandon you, or tear you to pieces and send your head down the stream toward the Lesbian shore.

However, you're not going to hear any of that; rather, you will hear a reading of the poem that assigns it meanings most workers in the field would find (relatively) uncontroversial. I will be committed to that reading only as an example of the present state of the art, an example that will allow me to pose some general questions about the art and about the conditions of its intelligibility. The difference between the two analyses, the one I shall

withhold and the one I shall elaborate, is the difference between the answers to two (different) questions: (1) what reading of *Lycidas* do I believe to be true?, and (2) what reading of *Lycidas* will best serve the purpose of the present study? The point may seem laboured or uninteresting, but I ask you to keep it in mind and promise you that in time it will connect up with some larger issues.

The first three words of Milton's *Lycidas* are 'Yet once more', and any reading of the poem must begin with those words. But how does one begin? Is 'Yet' to be read as 'Despite' and therefore as referring to a previously noted reluctance to act that has now been overcome? 'Forget what I've just been saying; we're going to do it again' '*Yet*, once more'. Or is this the 'yet' of exasperation, introducing a repetition whose occurrence is regretted even as it is announced? Is the 'once-moreness' of the yet-to-be described action infused with a profound and disappointed weariness: 'My God, must we do this *again*?' 'Yet once *more*?' To choose between these readings (and they of course are not the only possible ones) is to choose between alternative imaginings of the situation from which the words issue, where 'situation' is an inadequate shorthand for such matters as the identity of the speaker—what kind of person is he? where has he been? where is he going?; the nature of his project—what is he trying to do?; the occasion of its performance—what has moved him to do it?

It might seem that these and related questions are conveniently answered by the headnote that stands between the title and the first line:

> In this Monody the author bewails a learned Friend, unfortunately drown'd in his Passage from *Chester* on the *Irish* Seas, 1637. And by occasion foretels the ruine of our corrupted Clergy, then in their height.

But rather than narrowing interpretive options, the headnote proliferates them, if only because of its own publishing history. When the poem first appeared in 1638 there was no headnote,

although a manuscript dated November 1637 includes the first sentence. The second sentence, 'And by occasion foretels the ruine of our corrupted Clergy, then in their height', was added in 1645 when the author published a volume entitled *Poems of Mr. John Milton*. These few facts raise a distressing number of questions. If the first half of the headnote was written before the 1638 publication, why was it omitted?

One answer might be that since the poem was printed along with other tributes to the 'unfortunately drown'd' learned friend in a memorial collection entitled *Justa Edovardo King*, there was no need for an identification of its occasion. If this common-sense explanation were taken seriously it would demand a reading of the poem in the context of its companion pieces. We would be obliged to consider it not as a free-standing artefact produced by a single consciousness, but as a component in an ensemble effort. This, however, would have the problematic effect of suggesting that the 1645 version, differently situated, was a different poem, for instead of offering itself as one of a number of responses to a distressing fact—the death of a mutual friend—the poem would offer itself as evidence of the talent of a newly emerged poet. It would then be read in the context of the other productions in the same volume, which would include poems that find Milton worrying obsessively about the late maturing of his talent ('How soon hath time the subtle thief of youth, | Stol'n on his wing my three and twentieth year') and wondering whether he is making the best possible use of his gifts. These same concerns are expressed often in the prose writings of this period where, typically, they take the form of a complaint by the poet that he has been interrupted in his studies and forced to take on a task he would rather have declined. He has been compelled, he says in *The Reason of Church Government*, to 'write . . . out of mine own season, when I have neither yet compleated to my minde the full circle of my private studies' (*The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don Wolfe *et al.*, New Haven, 1953, i. 807). With passages like this in mind, *Lycidas*, with its elaborate metaphor of a

'season due' that has not been allowed to mature, will seem but *one more* such interruption: 'Yet once more'. Yet once more I have been plucked from the 'still time' of contemplation and thrust willy-nilly into the world of chance and mischance.

So far we have been proceeding (if that is the word, for after all we are still stuck on the poem's opening phrase) by looking backward to the possible antecedents of this moment of utterance; if we now go only slightly forward to the poem's next phrase, we find still further complications in the shape of additional interpretive alternatives: 'Yet once more, O ye laurels'. Note first the oddness of the address; one does not usually talk to trees. Of course, one does talk to trees and to all manner of other things in *poems*, and one is obligated to talk to trees in poems that belong to the category of *pastoral*. The generic identification is made in a note by Thomas Warton in 1791 when he observes that 'by plucking the berries and the leaves of the laurel, myrtle and ivy, [Milton] might intend to point out the pastoral or rural turn of his poem' (*Poems upon Several Occasions, English, Italian, and Latin with Translations, by John Milton*, ed. Thomas Warton, 2nd edn., 1791, 2). But this can only be pointed out to a reader who already knows it, who already knows (among other things) that there is a genre called pastoral and that one of its conventions is an address to nature and natural processes. When I say 'knows' I don't mean that the reader holds in reserve, and then applies, knowledge in order to give shape to a landscape that is as yet undifferentiated; rather it is within the requisite knowledge that the reader proceeds, and he quite literally sees the landscape into shape, filling in its details not after a first, uninterpretive reading but in the course of a first (not really the first since it is motored by all the previous readings that make it possible if not inevitable) reading. The direction of inference in Warton's observation (despite the footnote which suggests a process more inductive) is neither from a knowledge of the genre to a specification of the laurel's significance, nor from a noting of the laurel's significance to a specification of the genre; indeed it is not an inference he makes

at all, but an (involuntary) act of recognition (*re*-cognition) in which the genre and the significance of particular details come into view immediately and simultaneously.

That act occurs as early as the taking in of the poem's title, for among the things that a reader like Warton knows is that 'Lycidas' and like names are commonly found in poems that depict an idealized shepherd life that is used as a backdrop or frame within which a poet meditates on a range of issues including (the list is not exhaustive) agricultural policies, urban decay, civic responsibility, ecclesiastical corruption, military ambitions, economics, the pains of love, and the place of poetry in a world hostile to its existence. This last is particularly important because it marks the genre as a self-reflexive one. Moreover, it has been self-reflexive from the beginning, or rather, since its *non*-beginning. Theocritus, the 'first' pastoral poet, was not situated in a rural scene from which his successors were progressively more removed; he was himself already removed; a participant in the 'decadent' literary life of third-century Alexandria, his representation of an idyllic pastoral landscape is at best a remembered re-creation of a childhood in Sicily, a re-creation that breathes *loss* from its very first word. It is a paradox (and strength) of the genre that its preferred values are in a state of disintegration long before they are celebrated. The valorization of the 'natural' and simple life of shepherds and shepherdesses is made in the context of a pervasive nostalgia, which means that the very notion of 'the natural' is a construction of high artifice, a point emphasized by George Puttenham in 1589 when he declared that the intention of pastoral poetry is not to 'represent the rusticall manner . . . but under the vaile of homely persons . . . to insinuate and glaunce at greater matters' (*The Arte of English Poesy*, London, 1589, 55).

What this means is that everyone who writes in the genre does so with a sense of belatedness, of having missed the beauty and equanimity of a form of life that can be invoked only after the fact of its passing. The poet who would add his voice to a long line of lamenting predecessors knows that he takes up a task (of